

SECRET

DRAFT STATE/CIA PAPER: "THE NEXT TWO YEARS:
BREZHNEV, OR SUCCESSION? POLICY IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE US"

19 August 1977

SECRET

SECRET

Key Questions

1. The possibility that Brezhnev might be succeeded in the Soviet leadership in the next year or two raises certain key questions relevant to US foreign policy:

(1) How would an early succession affect the character of the Soviet leadership? Would it be stronger or weaker than the current leadership headed by Brezhnev?

(2) What are the domestic problems a successor leadership would confront (say, in the next five years), and what would be its prospects in dealing with them? Would the USSR, consequently, be better or less able than it is now to compete with the US in the international arena?

(3) How would an early succession to Brezhnev affect the conduct of Soviet foreign policy, particularly its relations with the US?

2. The answers to these questions (which of course are hypothetical, since Brezhnev may continue in power) necessarily are tentative and contingent, but they are supported by a general understanding of the Soviet system, a knowledge of what has happened in previous successions, and an estimate of the present situation in the leadership.

SECRET

SECRET

The Succession Process

3. The highest authority in the USSR is the party Central Committee, which confers legitimacy on the actions of the Party and the state. Since the Central Committee meets for only a few days each year and has almost 300 voting members, however, it is too large and unwieldy to exercise its nominal authority. Higher Soviet politics is largely the informal and concealed struggle of political organs and powerful individuals to speak in the name of the Central Committee. This is formally, and frequently in fact, the prerogative of the Central Committee's chief executive organ, the Politburo, but the power of its individual members varies markedly, and strong external influence can be brought to bear on the Politburo. The chief means of winning influence in the Politburo has been through control of: (1) the Secretariat of the Central Committee and its powerful staff departments, (2) the Government's economic ministries, (3) the security organs and the military command, and (4) the Party's territorial organizations in the cities and the republics. As a result, the Politburo has at different times been controlled by an individual (as under the despotic Stalin in his last years), by a

SECRET

SECRET

triumvirate (as in the early twenties under Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin), and by loosely organized factions (as in the early post-Stalin period.)

4. The most powerful individual in the Politburo usually has been the General Secretary of the Central Committee (sometimes called the First Secretary). No individual or faction since Lenin's time has been able to make coherent policy in the name of the Central Committee unless it controlled this office. The General Secretary's power and authority are neither constitutionally defined nor established by historical precedent, but vary according to his capacities and ambitions and to the strength of the forces supporting him, on the one hand, and those defending collectivity, on the other. Consequently, his departure from office has initiated a struggle, first to succeed to his office, then to acquire sufficient influence in the Politburo to enable the new General Secretary and his supporters to speak in the name of the Central Committee. Accordingly, each of the three successions that have occurred in the USSR, to Lenin, Stalin, and Khrushchev, have given rise to acute and relatively prolonged struggle.

SECRET

5. Typically in Soviet history there has been a two-phased succession: a first crisis when the incumbent is replaced as head of the Secretariat; and a second and longer phase arising from the new senior secretary's attempts to arrogate the powers of his predecessor, powers that he believes to be necessary to provide stable and effective leadership. While he maneuvers to consolidate power, policy lines tend to become fouled with political ones, and institutions just below the top leadership temporarily exercise increased influence on policy. If the party boss fails to consolidate power quickly, the Secretariat may become an arena of acute conflict, as in the 1964-67 period, and there may be an increase in the strength and assertiveness of the government in relation to the party apparatus, such as occurred in the early post-Stalin years. The political arena may be widened even further by the enhanced activity of institutional "interest groups" in the military, the economic bureaucracy, the scientific establishment, and the creative intelligentsia. Unless the leadership becomes considerably more divided over policy questions than it was in the Khrushchev succession, however, the party apparatus will probably be able to maintain its control over the other institutions and to limit their participation in higher Soviet politics.

6. The key to success in the succession struggle until now has been control of the Secretariat and its powerful staff (the central apparatus). Control of the

Secretariat, in turn, has been converted into varying degrees of influence over the provincial party apparatus, the economic ministries, the security apparatus, and the military command. Only Stalin, after 1937, succeeded in winning complete control over the regime's entire machinery. Short of this, a strong and reasonably stable leadership has been possible when the General Secretary and his factional supporters had sufficient strength to dominate the Politburo. This was achieved by Stalin in the late 'twenties, by Khrushchev in the late 'fifties and early 'sixties, and, in much more limited measure, by Brezhnev in the 'seventies.

Effects of Succession on Decision-Making

7. It has taken several years to resolve each of the three previous succession crises, during which time divisions in the leadership have complicated decision-making. Certain distinctions should be kept in view, however, in considering this question. First, a successor leadership tends to concentrate on urgent matters and to neglect policy innovations that require long-term planning and consensus building among diverse groups. Second, they prefer if possible to concentrate on domestic rather than foreign affairs. Successor leaderships have

SECRET

not been precluded from taking decisive measures on urgent matters. Thus, the Korean War was ended within a few months of Stalin's death, and Soviet involvement in the Vietnam War rose sharply within a few months of Khrushchev's ouster. If sudden international crises confront the post-Brezhnev leadership, it will not be incapable of acting, although it may not be able to deal with them in optimum fashion. (There is no question that a divided leadership bungled the Czechoslovak crisis in 1968.) It may find it difficult to respond to early US diplomatic initiatives, but it would respond vigorously to perceived threats to important Soviet security interests. Finally, factional struggles within the leadership do make it difficult to initiate basic reforms or to carry out coherent and effective domestic programs and this may prove especially damaging in the Brezhnev succession, when the cost of a continuing failure to deal with the USSR's growing economic and political problems may rise sharply.

SECRET

Setting of the Brezhnev Succession

8. Our expectations regarding the Soviet succession are based primarily on our general understanding of the Soviet system--especially such precedents from the Stalin and Khrushchev successions as are likely to be most relevant--plus reasonably good information on key policy and political issues, and some (but inadequate) data on men likely to be key players in the Brezhnev succession.

9. Brezhnev himself is unlikely to want or be able to arrange the succession definitively. Even if he manages to augment his present authority significantly, he probably will not share substantial power with a single heir presumptive. While Brezhnev may strengthen the position of several of the younger candidates, he will probably attempt to balance and circumscribe their power with extreme care to assure that none of them does to him what he, in similar circumstances, did to Khrushchev. He is also presumably aware of the risk either that his other lieutenants might shift their allegiance from the General Secretary to the heir presumptive, or that a designated heir becomes the principal target for other contenders and their patrons among the present leadership seniors.

Domestic Problems to be Confronted by the Successor Leadership

10. The USSR currently faces serious economic and political problems, and the economic ones, in particular, are expected to worsen during the next half-dozen years. These problems will probably cause considerable division within the leadership, complicating efforts by Kirilenko or others to resolve an early Brezhnev succession and consolidate power. It is thus likely that the early years of the succession will be more disorderly and troubled, at least within leadership circles.

11. The overriding problem is the slowdown in the growth of the economy, caused in large part by factors that will continue to operate: a steady decline in the output obtained from given increments of capital, increased costs of extracting raw materials, declining oil production, and reduced growth in the labor force. As a consequence, we expect annual growth in the early 1980s to decline to about 3 percent. Energy shortfalls and bad harvests in one or more years might cause negligible or even negative growth. Tinkering with the administrative apparatus that directs the country's economic enterprises is unlikely to solve the problem, but a search for administrative solutions may well be made and could prove

a contentious issue for the leadership in the early succession period.

12. Available alternative policy choices are bound to be contentious. Further reducing the rate of increase in consumption might adversely affect labor productivity and contribute to popular disaffection. Shifting industrial capacity from defense to the production of investment goods, or stretching out R&D and production schedules to slow the rate of expansion of defense-oriented industrial capacity, would have little effect in the short run. Moreover, defense production is what the Soviets do best as well as the principal engine of Soviet power, and any encroachment on it would be anathema to many Soviet leaders as well as to the military establishment. Selective continued dependence on Western technology, while perhaps improving growth potential, would be expensive, politically controversial, and subject to Western willingness to cooperate. Options to augment the labor force retaining older workers longer, bringing more young workers in by adjusting education policies, or reducing the armed services' term of service--might be somewhat less controversial to a succession leadership, but would have limited

SECRET

impact. Indeed, even a combination of measures--such as a leveling off of defense production coupled with measures to obtain additional manpower--would probably raise economic growth only slightly. In the energy sector, our estimate is that the longer the leadership delays adoption of a top-priority program of feasible conservation and increased production, the greater the overall adverse economic impact. Such delays would be particularly difficult to avoid in a divided leadership.

13. Political problems that will face Brezhnev's successors include aging cadres throughout the party and an erosion of party discipline--a development serious enough to be noted in Brezhnev's report to the 25th Congress. Outright political dissent in the USSR will undoubtedly continue to be a manageable, albeit embarrassing, problem. But the detente era and CSCE have set in motion currents of information and independence that will continue to prove very troublesome for Brezhnev's successors, involving repeated choices with contentious domestic and foreign policy implications. The nationalities question is likely to be manageable in the next half-dozen years since the Slavic leaders, if united, probably can cope with the non-Slavic quarter of the

SECRET

Soviet population. Somewhat further down the road, however, the nationalities problem may well become a more serious aggravation. The Soviets' East European empire has moderate to serious economic problems that will worsen with Soviet energy shortfalls, and which, combined with the seeds of detente, CSCE, and Eurocommunism, forecast a more unstable than usual Soviet back yard.

Foreign Policy Implications of an Early Brezhnev Succession

14. No Kremlin leader has been so closely identified with detente as Brezhnev. He was a prime mover of the major Soviet-American accords of 1972-74 and is believed to have had difficulty on occasion selling these to associates who took a less conciliatory position on bilateral issues or preferred other policy priorities. Any successor will have less personal prestige tied up in the cause of rapprochement with the United States. Accordingly, political succession will probably slow down the pace of relations and tend to a gradual cooling. Selective detente, however, should remain the framework of Soviet foreign policy after Brezhnev. The motives for dialogue with the US will be durable so long as both sides perceive the nuclear arms race to be

SECRET

dangerous, and expensive. At best, however, any achievable strategic arms limitation agreement at this stage can only temper the competition for some form of strategic advantage, primarily through restraining weapons development programs.

15. Brezhnev's successors will be aware of how effectively he used summitry to advance his cause at home as well as abroad. They, too, may succumb to this temptation, though they may be inclined to accent the ceremonial rather than substantive. In any case, summitry will be awkward until a clear single leader emerges because of the edge in prestige it affords.

While prospects are that the Sino-Soviet antagonism will not soon be mollified, within a few years Peking as well as Moscow could view some easing of tensions in state relations (though probably not Party relations) as desirable. The road to such an easement will be difficult, and Peking's ability to initiate new policies or be responsive to Soviet moves in this direction will be limited by its own succession struggle.

16. A loss of momentum in the conduct of detente need not result in an overall destabilization of the

SECRET

US-Soviet relationship. As it is, a slow-down has been underway to varying degrees since late 1974 without producing any drastic escalation of trouble to the point of confrontation. Nevertheless, a lapse of two to five years in SALT, especially without some arrangement to extend the Interim Agreement, could have an unsettling effect insofar as pressures for the development and deployment of new weapon systems will mount, and the hazards of a downward spiral in US-Soviet relations would increase. And other substantive and atmospheric strains in the bilateral relationship could sufficiently cumulate and trouble the dialogue that any top-level decision on either side to resume a specific search for improved relations would encounter great difficulty, both in obtaining the support of a domestic consensus and in interesting the other super power.

17. / In view of the signs of controversy during Brezhnev's tenure, specific policies of interest to the US--arms control, the Middle East, and trade--could easily get tangled in succession politics. Some Soviet leaders can be expected to urge that higher priority be given to maintenance of internal self-sufficiency,

SECRET

furthering the common objectives of the socialist movement, and, perhaps, projection of Moscow's influence elsewhere abroad, than to limited cooperation with the US. This tougher outlook is probably well represented among the ideologues, many provincial party bosses, in the security forces, and in the higher officers' corps. The foreign policy influence of these elements could increase markedly if they come to believe that the then extant leadership threatens their perquisites or jeopardizes the security of the Soviet state. In these circumstances, the potentialities for Soviet miscalculations in dealing with the non-Communist world would be considerably higher than in the recent past.

Coda: The Unexpected

18. | More far-reaching complications could arise from a sharp deterioration in the Soviets' internal or foreign situation, especially the former. Successive harvest failures could generate popular unrest on a scale that would force major policy, if not leadership, changes. Over the longer term, nationalism among the minorities could even lead to massive separatist outbreaks with ramifications in the leadership. This danger is more imminent in Eastern Europe, where nationalism

SECRET

is combined with anti-Sovietism. Also of a more immediate nature is the possibility of Soviet interference in post-Tito Yugoslavia. While we expect the Soviets' China problem to remain intractable, we would be surprised if large-scale hostilities broke out. But if they did it would be more likely to be by accident than design, with both sides striving to limit the conflict. In these levels of threatening contingencies, residual Stalinist orthodoxy would tend to be resurgent, probably leading to a further stiffening in policy towards the US and to general limitations on contacts with the outside world as part of a tightening of internal discipline.

19. On the other hand, there is an outside chance that reformers-from-above will emerge who would introduce innovative economic measures, both internally and in terms of greater economic dependence on the West. These kinds of policies would be somewhat more congenial for the US to deal with than policies associated above with a threatened Soviet Union.

Scenarios for the Brezhnev Succession

20. / Because Brezhnev has achieved substantial, though far from complete, influence over the deliberations of the Politburo, his passing from office in the next year or two would give rise to a succession crisis with substantial implications for US policy. The manner of Brezhnev's losing power--whether by incapacitation, ouster or relegation to an honorary post--would influence the succession. Succession brought on by Brezhnev's incapacitation would provide an opportunity for a reassessment of Soviet domestic and foreign policy, although this might have little affect unless the succession led to the consolidation of power in the hands of a strong individual leader. (See below.) If that occurred, the possibility of reaching major agreements with the US, on the one hand, or of a sharp shift in the direction of Soviet foreign policy, on the other, would be enhanced. If Brezhnev were ousted from his office of General Secretary, presumably by a conspiracy, the consequences for US relations with the USSR might be substantial. (Whether Brezhnev subsequently was relegated to a purely honorary position or to political oblivion probably would matter little, since honorary figures in

Communist politics--like Walter Ulbricht in East Germany after 1971--exert slight influence.) Since Brezhnev's ouster probably could be accomplished only with the acquiescence of the military, which would exact a political price, the new leadership might find it difficult, at least for a time, to make concessions in negotiations on arms control.

Kirilenko

21. | If Brezhnev does not soon take measures to prepare the way for a chosen heir, and should he leave the office of General Secretary in the next year or two, Kirilenko would have by far the best chance to assume it. As Brezhnev's chief deputy in the Politburo and party apparatus, with responsibility for internal party organization and its supervision of the economy, Kirilenko's superior claim to the requisite experience to be General Secretary and his current access to the crucial levers of power strongly favors his candidacy in an early contest for the succession to Brezhnev. There is evidence that Kirilenko has in recent years taken over more of the daily routine of running the CPSU, but it is not clear how far this has gone. He also appears to have strengthened his position within the past year through the appointment

SECRET

of a former associate, Ryabov, as a secretary of the Central Committee with the important defense industry portfolio, and at least partial responsibility for "administrative organs."* Further, Kirilenko has publicly participated in two meetings of the Council of Ministers, a break in precedent he shares only with Brezhnev.

22. Whether or not Brezhnev has deliberately fostered Kirilenko's strong tacit claim to the succession, he may welcome that claim as giving assurance, to himself and others, that the contingency of his own sudden incapacitation has been provided for. Moreover, given the long career association between the two men, Brezhnev may feel more secure with Kirilenko as his heir presumptive. In any case, Kirilenko's availability gives Brezhnev a plausible excuse for not grooming a younger, perhaps more dangerous, heir. Since Kirilenko's age necessarily limits how long he can serve as a stand-in for Brezhnev, however, his own impatience to obtain the top Party post might produce increased tension between them with the passage of time, particularly if Brezhnev's performance comes into question. If Kirilenko were deprived of his

*The CPSU's euphemism for the organs of control, "administrative organs," include the KGB, the uniformed police, the military and the judiciary.

SECRET

superior position, and Brezhnev failed to make new arrangements favoring a particular candidate, the prospects for an orderly transfer of Brezhnev's power--which in any event are dubious--would be worsened. Apart from the loss of Brezhnev's favor, Kirilenko must fear an alliance between Suslov as potential king-maker and some other candidate for the succession. Moreover, if the succession were initiated by a successful conspiracy or political maneuver, Kirilenko's prospects would depend on the part he had played in forcing Brezhnev from power. All things considered, a reasonable estimate of the probability that Kirilenko would become General Secretary is about 70 percent.

Implications of Kirilenko's Succession as General Secretary

23. Kirilenko's succession to the office of General Secretary probably would ease the crisis of leadership initially and impress the outside world with the leadership's stability, but this might be followed by a turbulent phase involving a contest to determine the full extent of Kirilenko's powers. Even if Kirilenko were not simply defeated in this contest and forced from office, he might be able to hold on to it only by accommodating to the pressures of his peers in the Politburo

and to powerful interest groups, especially the military. Kirilenko's age and the magnitude of the economic and political problems that face the USSR in the next few years make it doubtful that he could bring relative stability to Soviet politics as Brezhnev did in the late 1960s. While it cannot be ruled out that Kirilenko might consolidate his power and deal vigorously with the problems facing the USSR, the chance of this happening seems considerably less than even, say 30 percent. The prospects in the event of a Kirilenko succession are for a relatively weak leadership, one unable to deal vigorously with the worsening performance of the Soviet economy, and incapable of achieving far-reaching agreements with the United States. Brezhnev's detente policy probably would be continued in an attenuated form, particularly out of concern to avoid dangerous encounters in the international arena.

Implications of Succession by a Junior Figure Currently in the Politburo

24. If Kirilenko did not become General Secretary in a succession occurring in the next two years, Brezhnev's heir is likely to be a somewhat younger figure in the current leadership. He would be less experienced in the

SECRET

conduct of affairs, especially foreign affairs, and would have much farther to go to consolidate his position in the leadership. The best positioned in this category of candidates is Kulakov, since he already is in the Secretariat, although Romanov, the Party Secretary in Leningrad, and Shcherbitsky, an ethnic Ukrainian who is Party boss in that republic, have a fair chance to succeed Brezhnev. The urge of these men to concentrate on domestic affairs and to conduct^{0.}_^ foreign policy conducive to that end might be even stronger than Kirilenko's, but their dependence on the military and reluctance to encroach upon the military's interests might be even greater than Kirilenko's, which would complicate efforts to improve economic performance. Soviet foreign policy might be subject to conflicting tendencies as the older Politburo figures tried to guide the new incumbent along established lines, while his age peers would perhaps favor more venturesome policies, particularly to deal with sudden dangers and attractive opportunities that might appear on the international scene.

SECRET

25. | If a younger figure rather than Kirilenko succeeded Brezhnev in the next two years, the initial crisis of succession might be sharper and the leadership's instability more manifest than under Kirilenko. The new General Secretary's efforts to consolidate his position might lead to a further weakening of the leadership, and perhaps to a new succession. Less probably, they could lead to a resolution of the succession crisis on the basis of strong personal leadership by Brezhnev's heir.

Implications of Succession by a Strong and Effective Ruler

26. | The analysis presented previously indicates that if Brezhnev were succeeded in office in the next two years, whether by Kirilenko or some other Politburo figure, this would probably lead to a weakening of the leadership's capacity to deal with the worsening problems confronting it. Are there circumstances in which an early Brezhnev succession might have the opposite result, that is, lead to a strengthened leadership better able to cope with these problems? Several of the necessary conditions presently exist which could provide an able and ambitious candidate for the succession with large opportunities for aggrandizing personal power:

- There is a manifest need to rejuvenate both the Politburo and the Central Committee, which have grown old and complacent during Brezhnev's reign.
- There is a similar need to purge the middle levels, where bureaucratic tenure and promotion based on seniority have fostered stagnation and caused some loss of discipline.
- There is a substantial reserve of able and relatively young officials whose ambition for rapid advance has been frustrated by Brezhnev's conservative personnel policies. If a candidate for the succession could mobilize the support of these men, by rewarding them with positions in the Central Committee and the Politburo he might be able to create a powerful personal machine that could dominate the Soviet political system.
- The relatively poor performance of the Soviet system in recent years, which is reflected in reduced economic growth and in the failure to fulfill high expectations of foreign policy successes, could provide the basis for an appeal

to patriotic and Communist sentiments
for support in overhauling the political
system in order to compete more effec-
tively on the world scene.

27. Militating against the rapid rise of a powerful and innovative new General Secretary is the apparent capacity and determination of bureaucratic groups to protect their institutional and personal privileges from reformist measures and arbitrary commands imposed from above. A leader possessed of a powerful will and superior cunning would be needed to overcome their resistance. It is hard to discern such a figure in the current Politburo or Secretariat, and the chances are strongly against any outsider attaining the post of General Secretary in the next several years. Still, it cannot be ruled out that one of the contenders--a Kulakov, a Romanov, even a Kirilenko--may possess the requisite qualities but is obliged to conceal them temporarily so as not to provoke his colleagues. The probability that a leader will emerge to capitalize on the conditions favoring strong personal rule is a bare 10 percent in the next two years, perhaps 20 to 30 percent in the next five years.

28. If a strong personal ruler did emerge during the Brezhnev succession, the prospects for Soviet development in the next decade might change markedly. Even if he tried seriously to ameliorate the basic problems of the Soviet regime, of course, he might manifestly fail, as Khrushchev did, and his rule might be followed by a new phase of bureaucratic conservatism and acquiescence in the decline of the economy. On the other hand, he might have some success in reforming the Soviet system. His reforms, unlike Khrushchev's, probably would be directed at strengthening Party and state discipline, with the object of achieving increased efficiency in the economy. At the same time, he would probably find it necessary to encourage initiative in economic management. Technocrats might have a greater influence on policy formulation, although the leader's position would still depend on his control of the party apparatus. Were he to succeed in his endeavors, the Soviet Union might end up having greater resources available for competition with the United States than now seems likely.

29. In foreign policy, a strong General Secretary would probably try to focus on internal affairs, and he might be in a position to negotiate substantial agreements with the United States aimed at liberating the resources needed to improve the long-term prospects of

SECRET

the Soviet economy. His powers would be far from absolute, however. He would still find it difficult to make large concessions in negotiations, and his position could be jeopardized by sharp reverses on the international scene, especially in Eastern Europe.

On the Influence of the Military During the Brezhnev Succession

30. The military command's involvement in higher politics has been important throughout the post-Stalin period. Brezhnev's career frequently brought him close to the military, and he has been careful to win its acquiescence in arms control negotiations. The military's influence tends to vary, however, according to its own cohesion and, inversely, to that of the political leadership. The military's influence has tended to be strongest at time^s of succession, as in the early post-Stalin years and in the post-Khrushchev period, and weakest under a strong personal leader, as under Khrushchev in the late 'fifties and early 'sixties. Not until Khrushchev had consolidated his position, for example, was he able, in 1958, to announce military plans that were to lead to a substantial reduction in Soviet defense spending. Even so, despite his strong political position, Khrushchev

SECRET

later found it expedient to withdraw his military plans in the face of opposition from top military figures.

31. The probable disunity and relative weakness of the political leadership in the Brezhnev succession make it likely that the military's influence will be significantly greater than it has been under Brezhnev. This will be especially true if Brezhnev is removed by a conspiracy or if Brezhnev's successor fails to consolidate his position. In a contest for Brezhnev's position contenders will be reluctant to favor measures, particularly those affecting Soviet security interests, that the military find^s unacceptable. Individual leaders may actively solicit the military's support for their candidacy, although they may subsequently harden their attitude toward the military's concerns if they succeed in consolidating their position. (This, for example, was the course Khrushchev followed.) Only if a strong figure emerges as General Secretary and consolidates power is the military's influence likely to be reduced, possibly allowing the political leadership large discretion in arms control negotiations and in Soviet defense expenditures.